

Broadband Adoption in the 21st Century: Communication Technology, Poverty and Inequality in New Jersey

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Overview

There is growing consensus amongst policy makers and researchers that access to new communication technologies is a social good within low-income communities. However, while there is broad agreement on the importance of broadband adoption, there is a lack of research and analysis on the socio-economic and civic effects of broadband adoption in low-income communities. Through a research project focused on the three sites across New Jersey—Adult Learning Center of Newark, The Atlantic County Women’s Center and the Plainfield Public Library— we are developing a qualitative research approach to the study of broadband adoption that looks at the socio-economic effects of broadband adoption in low-income communities. The study will include participant observation, semi-structured interviews with participants and staff, as well as document collection. Data will be kept confidential and participant consent is required.

Guiding Questions

Through a qualitative study, the Rutgers University research team will examine the relationship between Internet access, and lack thereof, and some of the core social and economic problems. The guiding research question is as follows:

- What are the tangible social and economic effects of broadband adoption in low-income urban communities?

More specifically the research will be guided by a subset of the following broad questions:

- Does Internet adoption in low-income communities positively affect our public education system (truancy, college access, high school graduation)?
- How does Internet adoption impact small business in distressed neighborhoods?
- Does Internet adoption in low-income communities lead to higher employment rates and does it help catalyze economic development and local entrepreneurialism in distressed neighborhoods?
- Is there a positive correlation between Internet adoption and civic engagement amongst low-income people? If so what does this look like in practical terms?
- What are the practical skills and technology access needs that people should have to be a productive part of the 21st century workforce?
- What are the different models for community broadband adoption (community organizing, service provision)? Which models are more effective and why?

Research Sites

New Community Corporation: Adult Learning Center (ALC)

The New Community Corporation (NCC) in Newark, New Jersey was founded in 1968 and it is “the largest comprehensive community development agency in the country.”¹ NCC owns and manages 2,000 units of housing and employs 1,300 people. Its assets are valued at more than \$500,000,000 and its programs and services touch the lives of 50,000 Newark and Essex County residents every day. The Adult Learning Center (ALC), the adult education program within NCC focuses “its services to include the neighborhood’s primarily low-income immigrant populations (from many different countries), who have similar education and social services needs.” According to the web site, “the Adult Learning Center's objective is the spiritual, social, economic and political development of Newark’s immigrant community. Advocacy is provided to residents on health, housing, employment, education and social services.”²

Basic computer classes are an integral element of the ALC and they will be the primary site of research for this study. The classes cover the rudimentary aspects of PC operation (e.g. turning it on, using a mouse, the windows concept, etc.), then progress to the following software: Gmail, Windows Explorer, Microsoft Office Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. The instructor, teaches in both English to Spanish throughout each class to reflect the needs of the students. The approximately 18 students currently enrolled come from a diverse group of nations including: El Salvador, Ecuador, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Columbia, and Liberia.

The Atlantic County Women’s Center (ACWC)

Based in Linwood, New Jersey, ACWC was founded in 1975 and it is a comprehensive outreach center for women and their families, providing programs from a “community-based learning” perspective. Members of the community are invited to the center’s two locations to participate in a range of classes, from building basic life skills, to technology instruction in computer use and digital literacy. The technology-related classes are facilitated at the center’s Atlantic City location, which is in a Stockton College satellite computer lab, granting the center access to up-to-date equipment, and the ability to bring needed opportunities for learning to the neighborhoods of Atlantic City.

Technology trainings are held at least once a month, and they were started as part of a larger effort to assist women looking to enter or reenter the workforce. The technology trainings are generally small, composed of approximately 6 – 10 people. The coordinator and instructor noted that the classes at the Atlantic City outlet, offered to the community as a whole, are largely made up of women.

¹ <http://www.newcommunity.org/about/>

² http://www.newcommunity.org/services/adult_learning_center.php

According to the instructor, the women in the classes are “technology immigrants,” people who are just coming to technological applications, after either a long hiatus, or for the first time. Sometimes particular students will take the same class repeatedly, in order to gain a complete proficiency.

Classes are focused on learning how to operate a computer, and understanding the Microsoft Office Suite. Navigating the Internet is integrated into almost all classes. Along with the technology trainings the center will occasionally give the organization’s old laptops to their clients who are able to afford Internet access at home. The instructor has said that the effort of The Women’s Center in providing computer instruction is an “investment in technology and education,” which consequently “raises status” in affected communities.

Plainfield Public Library (PPL)

PPL is an independent public library in Plainfield, New Jersey that houses approximately 140,000 volumes and employs 35 full-time staff. The mission of PPL is to “be the center of cultural enrichment and information for lifelong learning for the Plainfield community.”³ As part of this mission, the PPL has a computer lab where it offers free public access to the Internet as well as computer training classes, and, in addition in 2012, the library is establishing a new Job Assistance Computer Lab.

The computer training classes focus on teaching participants how to become proficient in basic computer and web literacy. Technology instruction classes at PPL are generally held twice a day, in the morning and evening. In the computer classes, approximately 25% of the students are retraining, with the remainder learning rudimentary level technology skills. The Head of Public Services at the library noted that of those who attend the classes, the majority are women.

³ <http://www.plainfieldlibrary.info/AboutUs/History.html>